
Making research work for you – a series of five workshops – an evaluation

Aileen D Wade

"Research skills should form part of core competencies for library and information workers at all levels and in all sectors of the information community" (Library and Information Commission Research Committee, p20)

You will have heard of "the lurgi"¹, or perhaps contracted it at some stage in your lives, but perhaps not the LIRG? Formed in 1977, the Library and Information Research Group, affectionately known as LIRG, promotes the value of information research, and links research with practice. It is an independent professional group working in liaison with the Library Association.

With the above in mind, the Library and Information Research Group launched a new programme of courses in 1999, entitled *Making research work for you*, with support from the British Library Research and Innovation Centre. The programme's stated aim was:

- to enable LIS professionals to develop the skills that they need to understand research and carry it out.

Each stage of conducting research was covered in a series of five one-day workshops, delivered fortnightly in London from January 1999 and in York from April 1999. Experienced researchers, David Haynes (of David Haynes Associates) and David Streatfield (of Information Management Associates) were responsible for designing and delivering this series.

Participants were able to choose to attend the whole course or select particular workshops of interest to them. The contents of each workshop is briefly summarised below:

1. *Managing your research project*

The first workshop introduced participants to the concept of research planning and took them through the initial preparation for a research proposal from defining the research question through to initiating, conducting and overall management of a research project, whilst staying sane! Importantly it included achieving the right mix of methods.

2. *Designing a good questionnaire survey*

The objective of this workshop was to alert participants to questionnaire design issues, selecting appropriate samples and different ways of administering questionnaires.

3. *Doing research with people: interviews and observation*

This workshop aimed to give participants a grounding in basic interview and observational techniques, choosing the right method and setting (context), achieving successful interviews, focus groups and recording relevant research data. There was an opportunity to practise conducting interviews.

4. *Creative data analysis*

Participants were introduced to a range of research techniques for analysing data, in different research contexts from practically-oriented through to more generalisable research. The programme briefly covered analytical techniques, trend analysis tracking and data analysis packages.

5. *Getting research results disseminated and used*

Participants were encouraged to consider key aspects of dissemination and uptake, and explore a variety of methods of dissemination from report writing to presenting seminars. It also covered ways of ensuring that research had an effective impact.

Making research work for you was aimed, LIRG stated, at funded researchers, practitioners who undertake research, and other LIS professionals who would benefit from good research techniques in their work, and would help to bridge the gap between research and practice. It also considered the

course a useful refresher for those who studied research methods in their degree course but have not been "research active".

My colleague and I attended the whole course. We are highly experienced information professionals (almost fifty years between us), privileged to be based in the Learning Centre at Sheffield Hallam University, and closely involved in the teaching, learning and research activities of Sheffield Hallam University. We deliver, to its science and engineering students, staff and researchers, what we believe to be a high quality information service. Given the increasing emphasis on providing evidence for the quality of service levels, and our limited formal training in research methods, we considered it appropriate to attend the series of five workshops. This would, we anticipated, enable us to provide that critical evidence, and develop our service to improve its suitability and effectiveness for our student body.

From an administrative point of view, without any doubt, the series of workshops was extremely well organised and as a result, the course ran very smoothly. We received documentation before each workshop detailing the day's programme and scope, including importantly the event's objectives (learning outcomes in higher education jargon), a list of participants, map and details relating to travelling to the location. Refreshments were provided both on arrival and throughout each day, including a reasonable lunch.

The choice of King's Manor, York, as the location for information professionals working in the North, and suitability of building were a stroke of genius. No less important was the timing, from April, which again suited us admirably, as we are not usually 'let out' during our first semester! Other participants seemed to concur with this view. Overly long days were avoided, and we even managed to visit York Minister (albeit fleetingly) on our way each Thursday. For me, as an Official Presenter for the Mary Rose Information Group, it was an opportunity to gaze up at the Mary Rose bosses. It almost felt like playing truant from school! Evensong was a possibility at the end of each workshop if a later train were to be taken for the homeward journey.

King's Manor benefits from an attractively maintained courtyard furnished with easily moveable benches and well-managed lawns. The location enabled us to take advantage of the late Spring - early Summer (sunny) weather during the many group activities; the remainder of our time was spent in a room appropriate for the nature of our activities. If you have ever organised a conference or a course, or run a training event, you will have rapidly learnt of the importance of getting right these organisational issues. LIRG scored high in this area!

The two Davids delivered the five workshops, with a little help from LIRG friends. It was a nice touch that a LIRG committee member introduced each workshop and briefly described the work of this possibly scarcely known research group. They worked well together, offering complementary experience and skills. They came across as personable, making themselves available to us throughout the day. Their differing styles enabled them to work well together, to our mutual benefit.

At each session, we received a further information pack duplicating what we had already been sent (useful for those who may not have brought it with them!) and to which we added materials throughout the day. It was clear that the presenters had spent time in planning the workshop contents and that they were familiar, on the whole, with what each presenter would be covering. The programme provided us with timings for each aspect of the day to which the presenters generally adhered to. Nevertheless, we were given an opportunity to alter the programme if we felt as a group that we wished to focus more on one aspect than another. We were also given a reading list and information about LIRG for future reference.

Each session comprised a mixture of formal presentation, individual and small group work, as well as informal full group interaction. This gave ample opportunity for all participants and presenters to contribute their ideas and experience, which was especially useful given our varying backgrounds. In addition, participants were able to put into practice and test out our ideas in a supportive environment. At the end of each day, we were given an evaluation form which could be completed by each group, or individually if views about the day differed.

Running the workshops as a consecutive series enabled a number of participants, like my colleague and me, to build up a relationship with those who attended more than one workshop; this led to our working more effectively together. Furthermore, our attendance at one workshop, meant that we "knew the ropes" as well as the presenters, and could rapidly settle down to the day familiar with its structure.

It was undoubtedly the case that the workshops, arranged as a consecutive series, served as a strength, but it also meant that there was some inevitable duplication of material during the series which led to some frustration from participants. Before the series is re-run, it would be advisable to remove any duplication, and it is recommended that the presenters should, as far as possible, draw upon different examples from their experiences for each workshop. Another possibility is for LIRG to draw upon a wider range of presenters to ensure more variety of material. There was a small degree of misunderstanding for some of the practical exercises where participants were not always entirely clear about what was expected of them.

Given our backgrounds, Roger and I are only too familiar with running training events with a mixed audience. The presenters of the workshops need to reconsider or make clearer their target audience. Content wise, it was intended for professionals like my colleague and me who do not have any formal training in research methods and would benefit from the introductory level the course offered. The series, run over several weeks (and this could also be, delivered over consecutive days) gave continuity to the workshop programme. *Making research work for you* would also serve as a refresher. It was not really suitable for the more experienced and certainly not for practitioners heavily involved in this area of work. Consequently there was some tension created owing to a certain level of dissatisfaction from a number of experienced researchers in the audience who were disappointed with the course content; clearly they thought that the course needed to be more challenging for them.

We also suggest that the presenters should consider taking advantage of technology to deliver some of the course. This might include a demonstration of statistical packages and ways in which to benefit

from the use of the technology to improve/manipulate research findings. The course was disappointing in that it failed to cover this area adequately.

So do I recommend it? My response is a definite yes, though anybody who might be unclear should approach the LIRG organisers! I would recommend, however, that LIRG considers offering a different programme for the more experienced.

A unique feature of the programme was that LIRG ensured that participants would be supported and mentored by experienced researchers from amongst LIRG's membership. I intend to follow up this opportunity as I am shortly to embark upon undertaking some research at my own institution which can now be embedded in an understanding of some formal training thanks to LIRG! Whilst I now have opportunities to put into practise my newly acquired skills, the course presenters were very clear in their view that none of us should carry out research for research's sake, and that what research we do must be embedded in the real world.

I would also like to reflect back on the quotation from the Library and Information Commission at the beginning of my evaluation which indicates the importance of providing research skills to all as "*part of core competences for library and information workers at all levels and in all sectors of the information community*"². LIRG should consider making available either to a library school student or practising librarian/information worker in the process of chartering, a subsidised place on the series as a way of demonstrating its commitment to this view.

References

¹Fictitious disease popularised and probably invented by the cast of the BBC Radio's *The Goon Show* (1949-1960)

²Library and Information Commission Research Committee (1998). *Prospects: a strategy for action: Library and information research, development and innovation in the United Kingdom*, LIC.